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Book Reviews

Barnabas Calder, *Raw Concrete: The Beauty of Brutalism*; William Heinemann (London, 2016), 404 pp. incl. around 60 b&w ills; ISBN: 0434022446; £25.00

Reviewed by Alistair Fair

Brutalism, it seems, is having a moment in the sun, with a recent flurry of publications on the kind of architecture described in 1955 by the historian and critic Reyner Banham as embodying ‘brutality, [...] *je-m’ en-foutisme*, [and] bloody-mindedness’ (*Architectural Review*, 118/708, December 1955, pp. 354–61). Banham’s ‘New Brutalism’ was the antithesis of the pragmatic, picturesque, Scandinavian-inspired ‘New Empiricist’ or ‘New Humanist’ architecture of the immediate post-war years, being characterised by its overt devotion to the apparently honest expression of programme, construction and materials, and informed by a rich and complex set of ideas and philosophies that crossed over into the world of contemporary art. Alison and Peter Smithson’s school at Hunstanton (1950–54) was the key early example. Its exposed steel frame with brick infill panels and large windows evoked the recent work in Chicago of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe whilst also showing more-or-less how it was made, while its standard-issue water tank demonstrated an embrace of everyday ordinariness. A broader definition of Brutalism, however, soon emerged, referring to a blocky, massy architecture that made much of exposed concrete – the *béton brut* that forms one of the several possible roots of the term ‘Brutalism’

itself. It went on to be one of several ways in which post-war architects in Britain and beyond could be 'modern', as Elaine Harwood's excellent *Space Hope and Brutalism* demonstrates especially well. However, it was not a homogenous approach or uncontested label, being repudiated by many of those to whom it was applied.

By the 1980s and 1990s, many Brutalist buildings had become objects of criticism, amid increased scepticism of Modern architecture and planning more generally. One thinks, for example, of the Prince of Wales's observation that the National Theatre in London seemed like a 'clever way of building a nuclear power station in the middle of London without anyone objecting', or his comment that the now sadly demolished (and rather brilliant) Central Library in Birmingham looked more like a place in which books might be burned than read. Barnabas Calder began his research on post-war British architecture in the early 2000s, in a climate that remained largely hostile to this kind of **building**, although a number of individuals and groups including the Twentieth Century Society increasingly proved exceptions to the rule. Calder's new book, *Raw Concrete*, was thus conceived as a polemical text that would make the case for this sort of architecture in order to win new devotees. While clearly the battle has not yet been won – one thinks of the Prime Minister's recent broadside against post-war housing estates – something of a sea-change is evident in the increasing number of books, articles, and websites on Brutalism, the 'listing' of a small but growing number of post-war British buildings, and the fetishisation of the image of Brutalism on tea towels, mugs and plates. In this context, *Raw Concrete* now functions as much as a celebration as an attempt to provoke among its readers

the same Damascene conversion that Calder – who confesses to having been rather sceptical of **twentieth-century** architecture until his twenties – himself experienced at the hands of the National Theatre and the Barbican Estate.

Raw Concrete is billed as a ‘personal greatest hits’. That is to say, it is not a comprehensive history of the theory and practice of Brutalism. Nor is it an attempt to excuse the failures of the period by re-stating the commitment of many of its protagonists, on the political right as well as the left, to **a kind of** social democracy. Rather, Calder writes about his favourites. His approach is to see these buildings not as proxies for such things as a well-meaning Welfare State, but rather as works of architectural creation that embody a range of ideas, are situated in a range of contexts, and which are the products of often messy yet incredibly precise and controlled processes. Each example introduces broader themes. Thus the Hermit’s Castle at Achmelvich prompts a discussion of the nature and history of concrete; later, we read of techniques of concrete construction and finish, with sources including a detailed forty-page concrete specification document by Ernő Goldfinger’s office. Calder’s key point here is that this architecture is not cheap nor simply thrown up without thought.

Calder writes in an informally accessible way that demonstrates obvious passion and seems also to delight in its iconoclastic attitude. Banham and the Smithsons, for example, are likened to ‘bored teenagers smashing up the village bus stop.’ The book is semi-autobiographical, in the vein of recent work by John Grindrod, **Lynsey Hanley**, and Owen Hatherley; in its personal nature it also brings to mind Timothy Brittain-Catlin’s *Bleak Houses* (Cambridge, Ma., 2014) as well as the

classic work of Banham and Ian Nairn. Calder begins in confessional mode, opening the book with the admission, 'I am a lover of concrete' – at which point I had a vision of a 'Brutalists Anonymous' meeting. We read of his early visits to Trellick Tower, the devotion to the Barbican that led his friends, weary of being taken there and told about it, to dub it the 'Barnican', as well as his night in a minuscule concrete bothy on the remote west coast of Scotland. Yet Calder's tone and style are backed up by a real understanding of the period's architecture, and the circumstances in which it was produced. In particular, his interest in the work of Denys Lasdun – whose National Theatre formed the subject of his Ph.D. thesis – and his deep knowledge of the Lasdun archive shine through in incisive discussions not only of the National but also Lasdun's New Court at Christ's College, Cambridge, where Calder lived as a doctoral student. These chapters are the most conventionally architectural-historical in the work, drawing on a rich seam of primary sources to highlight Lasdun's significant achievements.

Some of Calder's other examples are less well-known, at least beyond the Brutalist *cognoscenti*, and I particularly enjoyed the chapter on the 'commercial' architects of the post-war building boom, not least Richard Seifert and Rodney Gordon. Of the latter, he comments, in typically poetic fashion, that 'whilst some fashionable architect seemed to dress their buildings in exposed concrete as the latest trendy style, Rodney Gordon's Brutalism comes straight from its guts – an atavistic grunt frozen in concrete in all its intrusive, uncouth virility.' More seriously, the discussion of the influence and architecture of Leslie Martin reminded me of his significance, as an architect and especially as a networker and yielder of influence. Yet, barring one or two studies, Martin remains little-

examined in any real detail by historians, and Calder's discussion was, like Adam Sharr and Stephen Thornton's *Demolishing Whitehall* (Farnham, 2013), rather tantalising. Calder dubs Martin the 'establishment radical', highlighting one of the book's most interesting themes, namely that radical architecture could be embraced by institutional and public clients as a way to mask social conservatism. In this respect, his analysis recalls the recent work of such historians as Dominic Sandbrook, who have stressed the social continuities of the 1960s.

Calder does not shy away from the problems with this architecture, though he tends to see the issues being in execution and management rather than the underlying design. Take, for example, his view that the best way to deal with the poor thermal performance of concrete architecture is to wear more jumpers and to remember that these buildings were rarely intended to be sufficiently warm in winter for a sedentary user to lounge in a T-shirt. Similarly, the problems with Glasgow's Anderston Centre, a multi-functional complex of residential towers, shops, and offices, elevated on a podium above a bus station at the west end of the city's Argyle Street, are, he suggests, as much to do with the circumstances of its construction. Away from the city's retail heart and near to a major motorway, the site was inauspicious, and the partial (and delayed) execution of Seifert's scheme did not help. Building began after the commercial bubble of the early sixties had burst, and the local authority struggled to find a developer willing to take on the site. The developers who eventually constructed the centre subsequently drove a hard bargain, with the council's stake in the project being cut and only the first part of the masterplan being built.

The National Theatre has fared better, having recently been refurbished by the accomplished architectural practice Haworth Tompkins. It is, in Calder's view, much the better for it, with what he considers unfortunate earlier interventions being undone. Leicester's Engineering Building, the work of James Gowan and James Stirling, is also praised for its enlightened attitude to architectural pilgrims. However, the fate of other examples has been less happy. The Newbery Tower at Glasgow School of Art has been demolished, in part because its image did not align with the institution's view of itself, while Strathclyde University's Architecture Building is no longer used by the department for which it was designed. In this respect, then, Calder's aim remains educative: for all that Brutalism has been reappraised by some, it remains under threat. A better understanding of it, he argues, will improve its fortunes.

Calder's position is very much that of the proselytising enthusiast. Not all readers will share his provocative opening claim that 'Brutalism was the high point of architecture in the entire history of humanity [...] one of the greatest ever flowerings of human creativity and ingenuity.' However, making his case with passion, he more than succeeds in writing an architectural history that combines erudite insight with accessibility. *Raw Concrete* captures something of the verve and triumphant optimism of a period when British architecture and design embraced confidently the ideal of modernity.